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Christianity founded on Argument.

A
S E R M O N

Preached before the

UNIVERSITY of *Oxford*,

O N

P A L M S U N D A Y,

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I P E T E R iii. 15.

*—Be ready always to give an Answer
to every Man that asketh you a
Reason of the Hope that is in you.*

 HE Opposition Christianity hath
met with in every Age, is no
more than what any Man
might expect, who considers
the Difference between the Spirit of it, and
the Spirit of this World ; and no Christian
can be surprized at it, who remembers how
expresly it was foretold by its blessed Author.
The same Carnal-mindedness that raised Per-
secution in the first, will produce Scoffers in
the latter Ages ; the same divine Person fore-
saw both, and his Disciples must now be pre-
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pared to expect *Mockings* and *Revilings*, as they were then *Bonds* and *Afflictions*.

THE Method taken by our modern Opposers, is, not directly to attack, but covertly to undermine; to take the Habit, and use the Language of Friends, and betray with a *Hail Master*, and a *Kiss*: They generally lay hold of some Errors of Believers, carry them to their utmost Length, in order to make their Absurdity more manifest, and thus exposing them, hope to insinuate a Disbelief of that Religion to which some have connected them, when, in reality, there is not the least Relation between them.

INSTANCES might be given in almost all the Writings of Unbelievers, but in none doth this appear more glaringly, than in a * *late* artful Performance, wherein the Sentiments and Language of some sincere, but enthusiastic Believers are made use of, not to expose their ungrounded Fancies, but to attack the most reasonable Religion, most worthy an All-wise God, and best suited to Men of the most sober and sound Minds.

As Doctrines so destructive of Christianity could not be entertained in the first and purer

* Christianity not founded on Argument.

rer Ages, let us examine the Beginning and Progress of them, and we shall see the Degrees by which this Opinion rose, which hath given the Enemy this Advantage.

THE first Preachers of the Gospel knew how impossible it was to make Men set their Thoughts in earnest on Religion, without the *preventing* and *assisting* Grace of God. Somewhat was necessary to prepare the Mind to receive Truths so contrary to corrupt Nature. To be *dead to this World, and rise again unto Righteousness*, seemed next to impossible for those who had entirely bent their Thoughts, and set their Affections on Things below; when to discard one favourite Passion, or part with a darling Lust, was *like cutting off a Right Hand, or plucking out a Right Eye*. Since then it was thus impossible for *Flesh and Blood to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven*; for Men of carnal Minds, and worldly Affections, to receive the Truths of the Gospel, they saw plainly some powerful Assistance was wanting to dispel these Clouds of Passion, to counter-act this Tendency to Earth, and make them set their Affections on Things in Heaven. Nor was this the Persuasion of Christians only: The Dif-

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faculty of calling off the Mind from sensible Objects, and worldly Pursuits, was perceived by all the Teachers of moral Virtue, and consequently the Expediency of foreign Assistance. But did any sober Christian or Heathen ever think that Virtue and Religion were *not founded on Argument*, because the human Mind, when engaged by Pleasure, or attach'd to worldly Affairs, was not of itself able fully to discern the Reasons of them?

SOME Christians indeed by Degrees went much farther, and instead of the Spirit of God first preparing the Mind for believing, and then intimating Reasons for it, have talked of Faith being *impressed* on the Mind without any Reason at all: That they believe by a blind Impulse, and are convinced without Argument by a *Light* which does not help them to see the Truth, but (which is a very extraordinary Property of Light, and more like the *Darkness* of Egypt,) it affects their Feeling, it makes them feel what they can neither see nor understand. A Method of Conviction little suited to reasonable Creatures, and moral Agents, but extremely well adapted to the *Calvinistical* and some other Systems. This Opinion having been lately
revived

revived with unusual Zeal, the Writer before us embraces the Principle, as best suiting his Designs, carries it to its utmost Height with so much Art and Address, that many on both Sides are pleased and glory in it. The Favourers of the Doctrine are so blinded with a Fondness for their Principles, as not to see the Consequences of them, and boast of so able a Teacher ; while Unbelievers are pleased to see a Man encouraged, in attempting to undermine the *Rock* whereon Christianity hath stood for so many Ages, encouraged, I say, by many Christians, who vainly hope to found it on the *Sand*.

AND accordingly *one* who hath given but too much Reason to suspect his favouring the Cause of Infidelity, delivers it as his Opinion, that * “ *If Christianity be not founded on Argument, nor will bear to be tried by it, then it cannot possibly be of God ; for as eternal Reason and Truth are God’s Will, or the Rule and Measure of the Divine Conduct, so consequently whatever comes from him will admit of the strictest Scrutiny by way of Reasoning and Argument, seeing every thing* “ *that*

* See Chubb on Redemption. *Preface*.

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*“ that is of Divine Original has Reason and
“ Truth for its Basis.”*

THIS is the Consequence that hath and will be drawn from this Doctrine; so that every serious Christian must be desirous of having this *Stone of Stumbling, and Rock of Offence* removed from amongst us.

THE Place and Time allowed for these Discourses, are not suited to a full and accurate Examination of the Book; but the Weakness of the general Principles may be shewn, and some of the Consequences of the Doctrine deduced and exposed.

THE great Foundation of this pernicious Opinion, is, *“ That Christianity is designed for
“ Mankind in general; a Herd little capable
“ of Reasoning, and unused to Argument; and
“ yet these must all believe in order to be saved:
“ There must therefore be some other Ground
“ for their Belief beside Argument.”* To take no Notice, that this is a very different Account of Mankind, from what we have usually met with from the same Quarter; where human Reason is magnified, and said to be sufficient for all the Purposes of Religion, and is now represented as not generally capable of the plainest Evidence, on which is founded the clearest

clearest Revelation : To take no Notice, I say, of this ; Is not their being assured by those whom they have no reason to doubt, *That* the Evidence of their Religion is as full as can be desired ; *that* the Books of the New Testament in their Hands are delivered down to them from the Ages wherein they were written, and confirmed by the concurrent Suffrage of every Age ; *that* there is no doubt of their Genuineness or Credibility, and *then* their own reading in them the miraculous Works, and being sensible of the Goodness of the Doctrine, *which all who read must in some measure be sensible of* ; are not these with the concurrent Faith of those who have examined farther, *Reasons* for their believing ? If by the Grace of God these Reasons are sufficient to produce in them *a lively Faith fruitful of good Works*, can their Belief be termed *irrational*, or said not to be founded on *Argument* ?

THESE Reasons and Arguments are such as they are obliged to act upon in almost every other Affair of Life ; and why shall they not be allowed as Reasons for them in their Religion ? But will the Foundations of Christianity be affected by the Foundations of their Faith ?

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Faith ? If the Reasons on which they believe are sufficient to answer all the Ends of Faith to them, will it follow that those who look further will be able to see no more ? That Christianity hath no other Reasons but what their Faith is built on ? No, surely : The more Men examine, if they examine without Prejudice, the more will they discover of the Grounds of our Religion. Every Truth is consistent with itself, and with all other Truths ; it may be viewed every way, and examined in every Light. And if the Proofs arising from WEEKS and ANALOGIES were never heard of by the Generality of Christians, will it follow they are of no use to confirm the Faith of those who have heard of and examined them ?

LET us consider this in natural Religion : The great and most conspicuous Works of the Creation, with the Consent of all around him, are doubtless Reasons for any Man to believe the Wisdom and Goodness of God ; but are more minute Enquiries into the natural World useless to confirm and strengthen him in this Belief ? Or when Appearances arise which tend to weaken this Faith, is a particular and more curious Disquisition improper

proper to support and vindicate the Truth?

GOD be praised the Case is the *same* with the Word of God: The great Truths of it, like the *Light from Heaven*, to which they are often compared in the Gospel, make *themselves manifest*, and plainly *declare the Glory of God*, and every the most *minute Particular*, when carefully examined, *sheweth his Handy-work*. Those who are employed in the *ordinary Affairs of Life*, will, by the Grace of God, see *Reasons* enough for their believing it, and those who sincerely seek for more, will be abundantly satisfied. It will prove like its Type, the Manna, which came down from Heaven, of which the Children of *Israel* gathered some more, some less, and yet *be that gathered much had nothing over, and be that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every Man according to his eating*.

BUT it is not from Reason *only* he would prove *Christianity* to have *no Foundation in Argument*, but from those sacred Volumes which are the Records of it: But let us examine his Evidence. And first, *that Miracles were not meant as Arguments*: This Proposition is so evidently contrary to the whole Tenor of the Gospel, and the express De-

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clarations of our Lord himself, *If I had not done among them Works which no other Man did, they had not had Sin*, John xv. 24. *The same Works that I do bear Witness of me, that the Father hath sent me*, John v. 36. *If I do not the Works of my Father, believe me not ; but if I do, if ye believe not me, believe the Works, that ye may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him*, John x. 37, 38. This Assertion, I say, is so evidently contrary to these express Declarations, that one would wonder how any Man could prevail on himself to make it : But let us hear his Reasons. *Miracles*, it seems, *were only natural Effects of Gospel Benevolence*.

THE Manner in which the Divine Power was manifested, was undoubtedly determined by Divine *Goodness* ; but can this, which is the greatest Proof of the Power coming from God, be alledged as an Argument to impeach the Evidence arising from that Power ? When there is no such Proof of *Goodness*, that alone hath been thought sufficient to destroy the Evidence that the Power came from God ; This is very observable in the *miraculous blasting of the Fig-tree*, and the *sending the Devils into the Herd of Swine*, their being thought

thought Proofs of meer Power, and not Manifestations of Goodness, hath been made a Pretence to prove these Miracles not to come from God; and by this Writer the very Reverse of this, The Miracles being full of Goodness, is made an Argument against the Evidence arising from the Power. Another Argument is, that our Saviour *restrained* the grateful Patients from *publishing* the Benefits they had received; *See thou tell no Man* was the general Charge. But was this in fact generally the Case? Or was it ever the Case, but where plain and obvious Reasons might be given for deferring the Publication till a more proper Season? Often it is, where an *immediate* divulging it might have provoked the Rulers of the *Jews*; as where our Lord healed on the Sabbath-day, or on some such like Occasion, which would have exposed our Lord to the Resentment of the *Jews*; before he had performed the Work which was appointed him. Indeed it is said God would in such a Case have preserved him, till he had compleated the Work of his Ministry; but such a needless exposing himself to Danger, would have been tempting God, which he who was to be a perfect Pattern of Behavi-

our to Mankind, always avoided giving any Encouragement to. Another Reason is, that he might not cause any Disturbance among the People, but that he might live in that *meek and inoffensive*, as well as die, in that *quiet and resigned* Manner which became the *Lamb of God*.

WE see both these Reasons in *St. Matthew's Gospel, Chap. xii. 14, &c.* where, after our Lord had worked several Miracles on the Sabbath-day, we read, that *the Pharisees went out and held a Council how they might destroy him ; but when Jesus knew it, he withdrew himself from thence, and great Multitudes followed him, and he healed them all, and charged them, that they should not make him known : That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the Prophet, saying, Behold my Servant whom I have chosen, my Beloved, in whom my Soul is well pleased ; I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall shew Judgment to the Gentiles ; he shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any Man hear his Voice in the Streets : A bruised Reed shall he not break, and smoking Flax shall he not quench, till he send forth Judgment unto Victory.* These are the Reasons of our Saviour's Charge to those
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on whom he wrought Miracles, that they *should tell no Man* ; but where these Reasons did not subsist ; where the Miracle carried with it no such Danger to himself ; nor tended to make a Disturbance among the People, was it not allowed to be published ? Nay ; was it not generally wrought in the most open and publick Manner ? I might begin with our Lord's first Miracle in *Cana of Galilee*, of which the Evangelist says, (and it may serve to shew us the Design and Effect of his Miracles in general) *This beginning of Miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his Glory, and his Disciples believed on him.*

I MIGHT, I say, begin with this Miracle ; mention the miraculous feeding the Multitude, which, from the very Nature of it, could not but be publickly known, and proceed almost through the whole Series of his Miracles : But I shall instance only in the greatest of all, our Lord's raising the Dead ; which seemed the peculiar Effect of Divine Power, since *the Issues of Life and Death are only in the Hand of God* : These Miracles, I say, of our Lord's raising the Dead were generally shewn openly, in the Face of the People.

ple. This is remarkable in almost every Instance : In the Case of the *Widow's Son* ; of *Lazarus* ; and more especially in that great Miracle of his own *Resurrection*, the Nature of which, and Proofs arising from it, are so well known, and will be so fully displayed in this Place, at the approaching solemn Season *, that I shall restrain myself from saying any thing of the publick Nature of that great *Anchor of our Faith*.

SINCE therefore no Proofs against *Miracles* being designed as Evidence of the *Divine Mission of our Saviour*, can be brought, either from their being *Manifestations* of Gospel Benevolence, or from our Lord's frequent *Charge* to those on whom they were wrought, that they should *tell no Man*, let us consider some other of this Writer's Pretences : Such as *our Lord's checking the Jews for demanding a Sign from Heaven*. But was this, because their Expectation of Miracles was unreasonable, or to be blamed ? The Truth is, as they received their Law upon the Evidence of Miracles, they might reasonably expect Signs in Proof of a Revelation, which was to null the Obligation of their Law. It is not therefore
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• *Easter*.

the Expectation of a *Miracle*, but the unreasonable expecting a particular *kind* of *Miracle* that our Saviour disapproves; their not being content with such Manifestations of the Divine Power and Goodness as were suited to the Genius of the Gospel, but their *demanding a Sign FROM HEAVEN*: Such as the raining of Manna, which their Circumstances did not require; or the Thunderings and Lightenings of Mount *Sinai*, which were by no means suitable to the Temper of the Religion they were demanded as Proofs of. This is followed by another very gross Misrepresentation; where the idle Curiosity of *Herod* is spoken of, as a *forwardly Disposition for future Discipleship, if Miracles had been designed as Means of Conviction*. But every one must easily distinguish between this wanton *Desire* of seeing Wonders, and a *sincere Disposition* to receive the Truth, which was a Temper our Lord never refused to gratify.

FROM these Arguments that Miracles were not designed as Proofs, he descends to another, from the Nature of Miracles themselves; *that they could not serve as Evidence of a standing Revelation*; and that is, that they could only be Proofs to those that saw them. But is not
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moral Evidence such as no reasonable Man can, or ought to withstand? And when aided by all its attendant Proofs, does it not carry with it almost all the Evidence of a Demonstration?

Or does the Credibility of a Fact really diminish by length of Time, in that Proportion that a fanciful Mathematician hath pretended? Is it not now as probable, that *Cæsar* was killed in the Senate-House, as it was an hundred Years ago? Or will it be less probable an hundred Years hence? Nay, is it not credible, that by the Discovery of some additional circumstantial Evidence, a Fact may become even more probable long after it happened, than it appeared nearer the Time of it?

THERE being then no Argument against Miracles being designed as Proofs by our Saviour; let us see the Use the Evangelists and Apostles made of them. *St. John* concludes his Account of the Miracles he hath recorded with these Words, *And many other Signs truly did Jesus in the Presence of his Disciples, which are not written in this Book; but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; and that believ-*
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ing ye might have Life through his Name, John xx. 30, 31. From hence it is evident, that the Evangelist thought Miracles Proofs to others besides those who saw them.

St. Peter immediately after receiving the Holy Ghost, in a Discourse to a very numerous Assembly at Jerusalem, declares, that *Jesus of Nazareth was a Man approved of God among them, by Miracles, and Signs, and Wonders, as they themselves also knew*; and then alledges the Completion of several Prophecies; and afterwards from the united Force of Prophecy and Miracles makes this Conclusion, *that God had made that same Jesus both Lord and Christ, Acts ii. 14, &c.* From hence it evidently appears, that the Christianity the Apostles preached *was founded on Argument.*

BUT since it is as needless, as it is impossible, in this Place to detect all the Sophistries of this Writer, I shall point out some of the most evident Consequences of his Doctrine, for the Sake of such sincere Christians, as may in some measure entertain the same Belief.

The first is, that if Christianity be not founded on Argument, it will be impossible to *reason* about it: To defend it by *Argu-*

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ment when attacked ; to *reform* it when *corrupted* ; to clear it from *Misrepresentations* ; or to explain the *Difficulties* of it.

If Mens Belief is to be resolved wholly into *Impressions* on their Minds, it is to no Purpose that we endeavour to persuade, we must only propose. Objections are not to be answered ; nor the Reasonableness of Religion evinced ; we are not to attempt to shew the *Agreement* or *Disagreement* of any Thing with the *Sacred Text* ; Scripture Expressions are not to be compared to settle their true Meaning ; *Logic* is needless ; and *Criticism* must be discarded.

Men are to expound according to their *Feelings*. And what are they to expound ? The Letter ; which requires Learning to understand it, and Reasoning to explain it ? No : They are to expound the Spirit of it according to their own *Feelings* ; to display the Light within. Thus the *Scripture* will be soon neglected, and when the Fits of Enthusiasm are over, when the *beated* Brain cools, Men will be reduced to downright Infidelity. This will certainly be the *Effect* of putting our Faith entirely upon these inward *Feelings*.

ANOTHER

ANOTHER Consequence of this Doctrine I cannot but mention in this *Place*, as it is avowed by this Writer himself : That *all Methods to improve our Reason, and cultivate the human Mind are destructive of this Foundation of Religion* : And consequently, that these noble Seminaries of Learning are useless, and prejudicial to *Religion*, which will not, according to him, admit of the least Alliance with Reasoning or Philosophy. But what *Reasoning* and *Philosophy* are these ? Does he mean by Reasoning the Dictates of sound Logic ; that Art which teaches us to *conceive* clearly, to *judge* truly, and *deduce* rightly ? Is this inconsistent with Religion ? Or do our Free-thinkers manifest their *Freedom* in any thing more, than in being entirely disengaged from the Rules of right Reasoning ? Sure we are, that those who have been the best Reasoners have given Proof of their being as good Believers.

BUT what is the Philosophy that is inconsistent with Religion ? Is it that by which we trace out the *Properties* of Matter, and acquaint ourselves with the *Wonders* of the natural World ? Are there any Discoveries *this Philosophy* can make inconsistent with

Religion, or which in the least lead to Infidelity? No: This Writer himself is obliged to own, that *those, who have studied Nature most have been the truest Disciples of the Gospel*. Did the great Philosopher * really design his *Christian Paradoxes* as a *Series of Repugnancies* between *Religion* and *Reason*, as this Writer pretends? Did he not believe the *religious* Opinions he there mentions to be *reasonable*? Or did he give them the Appearance of *Paradoxes* on any other Account, but to shew them in a stronger Light? Or perhaps to humour a false Taste for *Quaintness*, which prevailed in the Age he wrote in? But did his Philosophy hurt his Faith? Or has he not declared, that *it is only a slight Knowledge of Nature inclines Men to Atheism, but that a more intimate Acquaintance with her, brings them back again to Religion*? And this Writer himself confesses, that there *was never any one more studious of, and successful in Philosophy than his great and noble Disciple* †. And was he less studious of Religion? No: He made it his Business to put *both* on their true Foundations. His *experimental Labours* have carried the true Knowledge

* Lord Bacon.

† The Hon. Mr. Boyle.

ledge of Nature farther than those of any other Man ; and his Piety hath so ordered it, that he, *being dead, yet speaketh* ; and will (whatever Opinion this Writer may entertain of the Lectures founded by him) for ever *speak* to the Confusion of Atheism and Infidelity. But I mention him now, only to shew there is nothing in the *Philosophic*, inconsistent with the *Christian* Temper, of both which, perhaps, there never was a greater Instance ; so far are they from being destructive one of another : And if more Proofs were wanting, I might mention the *greatest* Philosopher of this, or indeed of any Age or Nation.

BUT does he mean by Philosophy, that better Science by which Men are taught to *know themselves* ; to pursue their *true* Happiness, by studying what is their *real* Interest, and the *Means* of attaining it ? Is Religion inconsistent with this Philosophy ? Or does it not supply all its Defects, and carry it to the utmost Perfection, by affording us Means and Motives more effectually to root out Vice, and excite us to the Practice of Virtue ?

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As Religion thus aids and befriends true Reasoning and genuine Philosophy, we are as sure as History and Experience can make us, that *these*, ever since Miracles ceased, have been the *greatest* Friends of Religion: And when Christians can be persuaded to neglect *these*, they will, next to God's over-ruling Providence, lose its principal Supports. This *Julian* very well knew; and whatever this Writer may pretend, took the most likely Method to ruin Christianity; when he shut up the Schools of human Learning to the Professors of it. But, Thanks be to God, his Design failed; and by the Learning and Argument of Believers, the artful Designs of Infidels have been in every Age defeated. They have tried the Strength of our Armour, and found it impenetrable; and would now persuade us to lay it aside: But let us not leave the *Fortress* that hath been hitherto *impregnable* for these *Feelings* and *Impressions* which will afford them an *easy* Conquest. They will be ever yielding like Waves of the Sea moved by every Wind; but when the Wind is once laid, they will soon settle into a dead Calm. Let us therefore make it appear, that we are not ignorant of their Devices.

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To Religion we owe the Recovery and Continuance of Learning; and may Learning continue to defend and illustrate Religion: May true *Reasoning* be cultivated; *Antiquity* explored, and *Nature* studied; that we may be able to use the Supplies they yield, to the Honour and Defence of Religion, the Glory of God, and the Good of Mens Souls.

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